Executive Summary

The documentary record from your Akin Gump employment (1988–1991) and subsequent D.C. Department of Human Rights (DHR) litigation supports a more sophisticated and, in key respects, more accurate diagnosis than either "simple harassment" or the firm's counter-narrative of "ideas of reference." The evidentiary pattern — persistent low-level hostility from multiple unrelated employees, social isolation despite good performance, sexualized and ethnically coded provocations, staged incidents designed to elicit "paranoid" reactions, a supervisor's public claim she feared you would "kill her," and a swift, unanimous management decision citing vague "lack of fit" rather than any documented performance failure — is more consistent with the phenomenology of workplace mobbing driven by group-level, unconscious dynamics than with either a rational personnel dispute or a purely intrapsychic disturbance in you. Applying Wilfred Bion's theory of "basic assumption groups" and Otto Kernberg's extension of that theory to organizational paranoiagenesis, the Akin Gump litigation-support/legal-assistant work group shows multiple converging markers of a group that had shifted from "work group" functioning to a fight-flight basic-assumption culture, with you occupying the structural position of scapegoat.[1][2][3][4]

This report (1) reconstructs the Bion/Kernberg theoretical framework, (2) maps your documented incidents onto the diagnostic criteria for a fight-flight regressed group and for mobbing/scapegoating, (3) evaluates the alternative "simple harassment" and "individual psychopathology" hypotheses against the record, and (4) applies Kernberg's envy-of-individuality thesis to your specific position as an intellectually distinctive, older, non-conforming employee inside a socially cliquish paralegal culture.

Bion's basic-assumption framework

Wilfred Bion (1954) distinguished the "work group," which pursues its actual task through rational, reality-tested methods, from the "basic assumption group," an unconscious layer of group life mobilized to defend against primitive (paranoid-schizoid and depressive) anxieties. Bion identified three basic assumptions — dependency, pairing, and fight-flight — any of which can temporarily dominate and derail a work group's task orientation. In the fight-flight assumption, the group behaves "as if" its only purpose were self-preservation through attacking an enemy or fleeing a threat; it will follow any leader who licenses "instantaneous attack or instantaneous escape," and it readily manufactures a scapegoat when no external enemy is available. Panic and rage are, in Bion's formulation, two faces of the same affect, and the group's coherence is maintained precisely by readiness for extremity.[2][4][5][6][^1]

Empirical work operationalizing this theory (Hafsi) found that experimentally-constituted "fight" valency groups were significantly more likely than dependency, pairing, or cooperative groups to generate scapegoating, and — notably — that scapegoated members were identifiable in advance by displaying attitudes or characteristics that set them apart from the group's dominant valency. This is an important nuance: scapegoating in fight-flight groups is not random; it selects members who are structurally different — "singletons," boundary or

gatekeeper roles, low formal status, or simply people whose personal history primes them to accept the projected role.[7][1]

Kernberg's extension: paranoiagenesis and envy of individuality

Otto Kernberg, building on Elliott Jaques's concept of "paranoiagenic" organizations, argued that organizations with faulty task structures, ambiguous authority, or ineffective leadership generate a spiral of institutional paranoia that "forces social interactions into a mould calling for forms of behavior which arouse suspicion, envy, hostile rivalry, and anxiety... regardless of how much individual good will there might be". In such environments, individual members who are otherwise decent may behave dishonestly or destructively purely as a function of the regressed group process, not personal pathology.[^1]

Kernberg's most directly relevant thesis for your question concerns large-group regression and envy: in regressed groups, "particularly intelligent, self-reflective, rational people are shut down immediately," and the group evinces "shared envy of individuals who maintain their individuality, security, rationality" — even while nominally rewarding a mediocre, unthreatening leader instead. Kernberg links this to malignant narcissism at the leadership level and to what he calls a broader "unconscious collective envy of people who escape the regression and of their creativity," which under an egalitarian or conformist ideology becomes "destructive to functional leadership" and to the individualist targeted by it. Secondary literature glossing Kernberg states the thesis in the precise terms you cite: groups aggress against individualists, and the underlying affect is envy of the individualist's thinking, individuality, and rationality.[8][9][10][1]

Mapping the Akin Gump record onto fight-flight/scapegoat criteria

Several converging features of your documented experience match the theoretical markers of scapegoating within a regressed fight-flight group, distinct from a simple, individually-motivated harassment claim:

Diagnostic marker (Bion/Kernberg/Volkan)	Corresponding documented evidence
Scapegoat is a "singleton" / structurally different from the main group	You were older (34 at hiring) than the other paralegals, described by a coworker as an environment where new hires were selected for "fit"/"social skills" rather than competence, and where a peer (Sussman) who also didn't "fit" resigned within weeks[^1]
Diffuse, low-level hostility from many unrelated individuals rather than one antagonist	Incidents attributed to attorneys (Hardee, Wageman), legal assistants (Winslow, Schaar, Harkness), supervisors (Sinnott, Robertson, Neary) and support staff, spanning three and a half years and multiple departments[^1]
Group closes ranks / excludes target from ordinary affiliative activity	You reported never once being invited to lunch by a firm employee in three and a half years, despite the firm having ~400 employees, and attempts at collegiality being "met with a hostile reaction"[^1]
Projective identification: group members enact aggression while professing good faith or sympathy	Coworker accounts (McNeil) show sympathetic private remarks ("Gary was such a nice person... it couldn't have been his work") coexisting with supervisors' public claims of fear and hostility — a split between private and institutional affect typical of paranoiagenic regression[^1]

Diagnostic marker (Bion/Kernberg/Volkan)	Corresponding documented evidence
Panic/rage as the fight-flight signature affect	Supervisor Robertson's dramatic, unsubstantiated claim to the whole department that the office locks were being changed because she feared you might return to "kill her," made immediately after your termination with no supporting incident[^1]
Staged provocations designed to elicit a "paranoid" reaction from the target, which the group can then use to justify exclusion	The letter-opener/"WHITE TRASH" incident, the tampered documents followed by a coworker's suggestive "ghosts in the building" remark, and the coordinated-seeming Neary/Raben interaction, each of which you flagged at the time as apparently designed to provoke a complaint that could then be pathologized[^1]
Faulty/ambiguous organizational structure as precondition for paranoiagenesis	A D.C. Court of Appeals disciplinary opinion criticized Akin Gump's senior managers for a "lax management style"; your own record notes an orientation that was promised but never delivered, and supervisory turnover/favoritism (Robertson's "favorites") reported by a coworker[^1]
Sudden, unanimous, vaguely justified expulsion decision ("lack of fit") rather than documented performance failure	Six consecutive positive evaluations (1989–1991), no reprimands in your personnel file, and yet termination one week after you formally reported harassment, justified only by unspecified "lack of fit" and unverified claims (Neary and Sinnott saying they were "afraid" of you) that were never put in writing contemporaneously[^1]
Institutional mechanism converts the scapegoat's grievance into evidence of individual pathology	The firm's psychiatric consultant framed your harassment complaints as "ideas of reference," and DHR adopted this framing despite corroborating your version of key incidents (e.g., the Harkness incident) almost verbatim[^1]

Kernberg's paranoiagenesis chapter independently describes exactly this last mechanism as a generic organizational pattern: a member raises a good-faith grievance (sometimes about bias or harassment), the organization responds with anxiety and defensiveness, and the resulting investigation frequently fails to substantively address the underlying interpersonal dynamics even when it formally clears the institution — precisely the sequence in the case of the "female staff member" example Kernberg cites, and structurally analogous to the DHR's finding that your workplace was not a "hostile work environment" while leaving unexamined whether mobbing dynamics were present.[^1]

The "specialized work group" and displaced authority

Bion's concept of the "specialized work group" — a subgroup that channels basic-assumption energy so the main group can keep functioning (the army canalizes fight-flight; the church canalizes dependency) — has an organizational analogue in how legal-assistant management (Sinnott, Neary, Robertson) operated as an intermediate layer that could absorb and redirect anxiety without the partnership (Lassman, Race, Segal) needing to engage the underlying group process directly. Notably, when you did reach an authority figure with functional distance from the day-to-day group (Segal, then Race and Lassman), the initial response was described in your own account as sympathetic and non-pathologizing — Race explicitly noted your allegations spanned sexual, ethnic, and general harassment categories without suggesting mental illness — only for the termination to follow within days, justified by unverifiable assertions from the very supervisors most implicated in the underlying group dynamic. This sequence is consistent with Kernberg's observation that incompetent or anxious leadership, faced with a destabilizing grievance, tends to resolve institutional anxiety by aligning with the existing subordinate hierarchy's narrative rather than independently investigating it.[^1]

Evaluating the "simple individual harassment" hypothesis

A simple-harassment account would predict a single antagonist or small identifiable clique with a specific motive (e.g., a supervisor with animus, sexual harassment by one individual), a clear complaint mechanism, and a proportionate remedy once reported. Elements of your record are consistent with ordinary harassment claims taken individually — the Harkness incident was assessed by an EEOC investigator as prima facie sexual harassment, and DHR itself substantiated the factual occurrence of several incidents (Wageman's gesture, Hardee's remark) even while recharacterizing your interpretation of them as "ideas of reference". But the sheer diffusion of hostile actors across attorneys, legal assistants, secretaries, and multiple supervisory chains over three and a half years, combined with the abrupt escalation to termination immediately following your first formal complaint, is harder to explain as garden-variety individual harassment and fits more naturally within a group-level dynamic in which many members unconsciously participated in a shared, low-grade hostile "climate" rather than a single perpetrator executing a personal vendetta.[^1]

Evaluating the "individual psychopathology" hypothesis (the firm's position)

The firm's and DHR's counter-narrative — that your harassment reports reflected the psychiatric symptom of "ideas of reference" — deserves scrutiny on its own terms rather than simple rejection, since it was upheld on appeal. Two considerations complicate it. First, several of the specific incidents you flagged as ambiguous were independently corroborated as factual occurrences by DHR and by the EEOC investigator, meaning that even under DHR's framework, the pathology (if any) concerned interpretation of ambiguous conduct, not fabrication of events outright. Second, and more importantly for the group-dynamics question: Kernberg's model does not treat organizational paranoiagenesis and individual sensitivity as mutually exclusive. His framework explicitly allows that a regressed institutional climate can generate genuine suspicion, hypervigilance, and even transient persecutory ideation in psychologically healthy members exposed to it, and that the more emotionally mature or self-aware members of a paranoiagenic institution are often the ones who become "alienated" from it and leave or are expelled, while the "normal people... become the most alienated" from a dysfunctional institution. Under this reading, heightened suspicion is a plausible adaptive response to an actually hostile-but-diffuse environment rather than proof of a primary thought disorder — a distinction the DHR process was not equipped to make, since anti-mobbing law did not (and largely still does not) exist as a distinct legal category, a gap your own analysis identifies by contrast with the Second Circuit's later recognition of mobbing in Sousa v. Roque.[^1]

Applying the individualist/envy thesis to your position

Several documented features of your Akin Gump tenure are consistent with the profile Kernberg associates with envy-driven group aggression against individualists: distinctive intellectual and reflective habits (your own retrospective analysis distinguishes your hedged, evidence-qualified language — "this is a highly speculative inference," "this perhaps meant nothing" — from the absolutist thinking Kernberg and clinical literature associate with true psychotic ideation, itself an argument that your cognitive style was that of a reflective, rational observer rather than a regressed one); social non-conformity in a self-described "cliquish," "country club" paralegal culture that explicitly screened for "fit" and "social skills" over ability;

and a pattern in which your one attempt to escalate rationally through proper channels (the October 1991 meetings with Segal, Race, and Lassman) was met initially with apparent respect, followed rapidly by termination grounded in the subjective, unverifiable claims of the very lower-level supervisors whose group dynamics you were reporting. Kernberg's broader argument — that regressed groups devalue and eventually expel the self-reflective, rational member who might otherwise provide better leadership, while channeling collective envy into the rationale that the individualist is somehow deficient or dangerous — matches the specific arc of your case: an employee with six consecutive positive evaluations and no disciplinary record, terminated one week after formally raising a harassment complaint, on the basis of an unspecified "lack of fit".[9][8][^1]

Synthesis: fight-flight scapegoat versus simple harassment

The available evidence does not permit a definitive clinical or legal determination — that would require access the DHR record itself only partially memorializes and that inherently resists retrospective reconstruction. But weighing the two frameworks side by side:

- A pure "simple harassment" model struggles to explain the diffusion of hostile actors, the absence of any single clearly motivated antagonist, the abruptness of termination despite a clean performance record, and the supervisors' theatrical and evidence-free claim of physical fear of you.[^1]
- The Bion/Kernberg fight-flight/scapegoat model accounts for all of these features coherently: a group under real organizational strain (documented "lax management," ambiguous supervisory boundaries, and a firm undergoing partner transitions and economic anxiety in 1991) regressed from work-group functioning into a basic-assumption culture, and — consistent with the experimental literature on fight-valency groups — selected as its scapegoat a member who was demographically, socially, and cognitively a "singleton": older, non-conforming, analytically self-aware, and structurally isolated from the informal affiliative network that bound the rest of the group together.[7][1]

On the specific theoretical claim you asked to have evaluated — that individualists are characteristically rejected by regressed groups through envy of their thinking, individuality, and rationality — the Kernberg literature directly supports this as a general mechanism of large-group and organizational regression, and your documented pattern of hedged, reflective self-report contrasted against the group's escalating, affect-driven, and ultimately punitive response is consistent with that mechanism operating in your specific case.[10][8][^9]

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